

The rediscovery of the Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti*

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One hundred and thirteen years after the last genuine record, the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* has been rediscovered in low foothills dry-deciduous forest north of Shahada, Maharashtra, India. Two individuals were observed in the same locality from 25–27 November 1997, exhibiting strong diurnality and behaving in a relatively conspicuous, confiding manner. Their identification was verified by extensive videotape and photographs, and these field observations confirm that the Forest Owlet is a readily identified species.

The Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti* is known from just seven specimens, collected from four sites in central India from 1872 to 1884. For the next 113 years there were no genuine records of the species. Several unsuccessful searches for the bird were made in recent years, including by Sálím Ali, S. Dillon Ripley and colleagues. A number of ornithologists considered the species possibly extinct (see Rasmussen and Collar 1998 for historical review).

From 13–27 November 1997 we (along with D. F. Abbott) searched for the Forest Owlet in central India in the states of south-eastern Madhya Pradesh, westernmost Orissa and north-western Maharashtra, in forests as near as possible to the sites where it had been collected over a century ago. However, the original collection sites could be located only approximately. See Appendix for details of areas visited.

On 25 November we found a single Forest Owlet in north-western Maharashtra, at 460 m elevation, north of Shahada; details of the precise location are being withheld as it is the only known site for the species as of June 1998. The town of Shahada is in the Tapi (Tapti) River Valley at about 150 m elevation. This valley, which is now almost entirely cultivated, extends to about 28 km north of Shahada, where it meets the Akrani Hills, the westernmost portion of the Satpura Range; the new Forest Owlet site is in the lower part of these hills. The slope at the site itself is minimal to moderate, the area cut by dry ravines, and the soil there quite dry, rocky and well-drained. The habitat is secondary dry deciduous forest, consisting mostly of teak *Tectona grandis* less than 10 m tall, and is rather open, without a continuous canopy (Fig. 1). A few older teak and several other species of large trees remain, but most are probably less than 20 years old. There were a few scattered large trees that were leafless in November. Little undergrowth was present where there were many trees, but there was considerable grass undergrowth in the more open areas, indicating little or no grazing there, at least by that date. A few hundred metres both above and below the site were long wet ravines, with some standing water, a little running water, and richer forests of taller trees, but we did not find Forest Owlets in these more mesic areas, suggesting the possibility it may have a preference for drier forest.

The Forest Owlet was first sighted by BFK at 08h30 on 25 November, high in a leafless tree. As we edged closer, the bird flew to a perch near the top of a nearby



Figure 1. Habitat at the rediscovery site at the beginning of the rainy season. (Photo: P. C. Rasmussen)

bare tree, where it remained for about 30 minutes, providing ideal views through a spotting scope, and enabling extensive video-taping. Its plumage was quite fresh, indicating relatively recent moult. When harassed by an Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* the owlet flew across the road, landing in the top of another leafless tree, where it was again harassed by a roller, which caused it to fly out of sight. We left shortly afterward for Shahada, and then arrived back at the rediscovery site at 17h00 so as to have the entire night in which to attempt to tape the calls of the Forest Owlet.

A few owl calls were heard in the area just before dark and just after first light, as well as sporadically throughout the night. All of the calls heard could be attributed to the more widespread species of owls in the area: Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum*, Mottled Wood Owl *Strix ocellata*, Collared Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* and Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata*. A distant unidentified call may have been made by the Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*. While the Jungle Owlet called more frequently than the others and extended its calling before sunset and into mid-morning, it was clearly not a prime calling time for any of the owls in the area. This is not surprising, as the end of the south-west monsoon rains must have been less than a month before, so it was probably two or three months too early for more frequent calling. Jungle Owlets were common in the area, while the nearest Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*



Figure 2. Dorsal (back) view of *Athene blewitti*.
(Photo: P. C. Rasmussen)



Figure 3. Ventral (underparts) view of *Athene blewitti*.
(Photo: P. C. Rasmussen)

we saw or heard was in a more open area about 200 m lower in elevation.

About 08h00 on 26 November a second Forest Owlet was found high in another large leafless tree about 200 m from the first sighting. It was conspicuous from a long distance as the sun was shining directly on its largely white lower underparts. Its worn plumage indicated it could not be the same individual as that seen the previous day. After flying a short distance, it remained on another exposed perch for about 30 minutes, allowing excellent scope views and videotaping, before flying off. We returned to the site at 16h30 that day and briefly saw a Forest Owlet near that morning's sighting, but could not ascertain whether it was one of the two previously seen individuals. Then, on the morning of 27 November, a Forest Owlet in fresh plumage was briefly seen at about 08h00 between the two main sighting areas, and was relocated downslope 20 minutes later for about five minutes.

Just prior to this last sighting BFK heard a whinny similar to that of a Spotted Owlet, but when he looked for the source of the sound, he saw a Forest Owlet flying toward him, and it landed briefly nearby, allowing positive identification. This call, which is likely to have come from a Forest Owlet, is the only call BFK heard which he thought could have come from this species, although D. F. Abbott (pers. comm. 1998) heard one give a screech.

Although there has been considerable confusion in the literature (Ali 1978), identification of the Forest Owlet is straightforward (see also Rasmussen and Collar 1998). From above (Fig. 2), the unspotted brown crown, nape and back, sharply contrasting with the broadly blackish and white banded wings, coupled with the broad blackish (fresh plumage) or dark brown (worn plumage) tail bands, readily distinguish it from both Spotted and Jungle Owlets. The breast looks entirely dull brown, contrasting sharply with the white belly and undertail coverts (Fig. 3). The white belly with several broad dark bars on the flanks makes the bird look quite different from the Jungle Owlet, which has narrowly barred flanks, and from the Spotted Owlet, which has dusky spotting on the belly and undertail coverts. The face is paler brown and less contrasting than that of the Spotted Owlet, and lacks that species's white border behind the auriculars.

At close range the upperparts of the Forest Owlet are a colder, greyer brown than the Spotted Owlet, with faint, small whitish speckling (more prominent in worn plumage) on the crown, nape and back. The mien of the Forest Owlet is more like that of the fierce *Glaucidium* than the clownish Spotted Owlet. The Forest Owlet looks quite large-headed, much more so than either Jungle or Spotted Owlets. The first of the Forest Owlets seen regularly wagged its tail from side to side, making the tail banding easy to see.

It seems likely that the (at least) two Forest Owlets we saw were a pair, and it is clear that the species is at least partially a diurnal hunter, as is the Jungle Owlet. Our finding of the Forest Owlet in the tops of bare trees by day during the winter months is exactly as had been noted by Davidson (1881).

While our observations confirm that the Forest Owlet still exists, at least in the area north-east of Shahada, they appeared to be largely silent in November, so we



Close-up of side of head of *Athene blewitti*.
(Photo: P.C. Rasmussen)

may well have overlooked them elsewhere. Thus we cannot extrapolate our findings to give any idea of the species's current abundance and distribution. Studies are currently being conducted in the area at which we found them, and other likely places are being surveyed, so hopefully further data on the range and status of the species will be forthcoming. While access to the area is currently not restricted, we urge potential visitors to contact the relevant local organizations (Bombay Natural History Society and North Dhule Forest Division) for information, and to minimize additional disturbance in the area, which is already under considerable local pressure.

We wish to thank Mr M. Pokyim, then Deputy Conservator of Forests, North Dhule Forest Division, in Shahada, who directed our search to the forest in which we found the Forest Owlet. We are especially indebted to Mr Ranjan Kumar Pradhan of Bhubaneswar, our driver, cook and interpreter, for his cheerful assistance in many ways, and to Mr R. Hazarika of International Ventures and Travel, Delhi, who made some of our travel arrangements. D. F. Abbott, Ashburn, Virginia, accompanied us in the field and took many photos, field notes, and sketches.

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APPENDIX

The following summarizes the areas at which we searched unsuccessfully for the Forest Owlet. Area (1), Gomardah Wildlife Sanctuary, was the nearest forest we could find to Basna, which is near the vague type locality of 'Busnah-Phooljan'. Area (2), near Paikmal, was en route to the second collection locality near Khariar. Area (3), Churabhathi, was a good forest area we happened on after we found that due to impassable rivers we could not get to the Gondabahali and Nilji areas, between which the second specimen had been collected. Area (4) is another forest patch in the vicinity of the type locality. The site where we ultimately found the Forest Owlet was the nearest remaining forest to Shahada, one of two West Khandesh collecting sites. We lacked the time to go to Taloda, the only other known locality.

- 1) **Gomardah Wildlife Sanctuary, south-east Madhya Pradesh.** 13–16 November 1997. 21°27'110"N 83°07'802"E, 195–250 m. Dry deciduous forest, ranging from tall trees along rivers to stunted dry scrub on slopes. Mostly second growth, with a few large old trees remaining. There is a large young teak plantation on the southern boundary. Appeared hunted out, no deer seen. Grey Langurs *Presbytis entellus* and Rhesus Macaques *Macaca mulatta* were common. No phasianids seen; one or two junglefowl *Gallus* heard. Not particularly rich birdwise.
- 2) **Religious shrine at base of forested hill near Paikmal, west Orissa.** 16/17 November 1997. 20°53'664"N 82°49'697"E, 200–400 m (the hills extending higher). Around the religious shrine at the base of the hill there are some very large old trees along a stream, but there is little undergrowth and the area is heavily disturbed by day. The forest on the hill itself is dry deciduous, with much cutting and second growth at lower elevations, but is moister, denser and taller higher up. Fairly rich birdwise.
- 3) **Churabhathi, south-east Madhya Pradesh.** 18–20 November 1997. 20°53'540"N 82°18'837"E, 335 m. Churabhathi is a small tribal village in a large forested area along the road between Nawapara and Gariaband. The forest is dry deciduous and the most bird-rich we visited on the entire trip. Langurs and macaques were common; no deer were seen. Largely second growth, with some old growth trees.
- 4) **Sirpur, south-east Madhya Pradesh.** 20–21 November 1997. 21°18'033"N 82°12'333"E, 245 m. A rather small fairly bird-rich area of disturbed secondary dry deciduous forest near a religious site along the Mahanadi River.